

AULUS CORNELIUS CELSUS
AND
SOME REMARKS CONCERNING
RARE EDITIONS OF OLD BOOKS
AND MEDICAL LIBRARIES

BY
J. C. WILSON, M. D.
PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS
IN
PHILADELPHIA.



READ
AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MEDICAL
LIBRARY ASSOCIATION AT WASHINGTON,
MAY 5th, 1913

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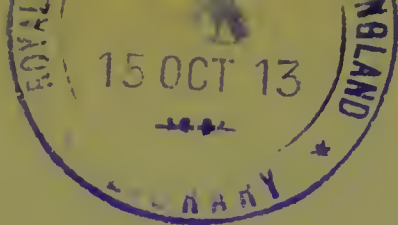
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BY J. C. WILSON, M. D., Philadelphia.

I. THE EPISODE.

In December 1912 the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, a non-resident fellow of the College of Physicians in Philadelphia sent to the most accomplished and versatile physician of our times, also a fellow of the College and one of its eminent benefactors in many ways, the catalogue of a dealer in old and rare books, in London. In this list stood the following item:

CELSUS. De Medicina. (Fol. 10a) Cornelii Celsi De Medicina Liber Incipit. (Colophon) Cornelii Celsi De Medicina Liber Finit Florentiae A Nicolao Impressus Anno Salutis MCCCCLXXVIII.

Sm. folio, *Roman letter*, 195 leaves (*A₈ blank cut away*), with catchwords and foliation; on Fol. 1a the arms argent two bars gules are emblazoned, and on Fol. 10a a large capital in gold and colours; several wormholes in blank portions of first few leaves carefully repaired and a part of Fol. 10 mended, several words being filled in, otherwise a fine large copy, bound in red morocco gilt, *Harleian style*, by J. Clarke
Florence, Nicolo di Lorenzo, 1478

Above the colophon is the signature *Georgii Antonii Vespucci liber*. Giorgio Antonio Vespucci was the paternal uncle of Amerigo Vespucci, he was a dominican friar and savant who gave public lessons in grammar and literature to the youth of Florence. Amerigo was placed with him at an early age and received practically the whole of his education under the direction of his uncle.

'Première édition, très rare.'—*Brunet*.

Hain-Copinger *4835; Proctor 6116.

The price was £84. On the margin was penciled "*This is a superb copy. Why not bleed the fellows of the College? I will go \$25.*"

The challenge was accepted and the operation of phlebotomy forthwith began. Never was blood given with a better grace. It is

an easy computation that with sixteen subscribers of the amount named and an odd sum the cost would be obtained, and Mr. Fisher, the Librarian, simplified the problem by pointing out that dealers make a discount of ten per cent. to libraries and that exchange at the moment was in our favor. Four subscribers were obtained and the affair, for reasons not at all inscrutable, was placed in the hands of the writer of this paper. The first thing he did was to request the librarian to order the book; the next was to obtain the money to pay for it. This was done in a remarkably short time. Thirteen additional fellows were given the privilege of subscribing, some personally, some by letter. Ten with immediate promptness availed themselves of that privilege. One of these offered to help make up any deficit, but was not called upon to do so. Another added to his subscription the small sum necessary. When the book arrived the draft was practically ready. These facts may upon occasion prove of use to other libraries.

The Regius Professor has long cultivated a passion "for collecting and possessing books, especially rare and curious ones." Dr. Mitchell is a bibliophile in the highest sense. The fellow of the College upon whom devolved the weight of the foregoing transaction has been all his life a dear lover of books of many kinds, not as a bibliomaniac, not as a bibliophile, but just for what he could get out of them. He would rather, provided the print be clear, a cheap copy of Sterne or Isaac Walton or any of the poets, that he could read upon a journey and give to a chance acquaintance, than the finest *edition de luxe* for which there is no room upon his shelves or in his heart. As for *incunabula*, he had heard much and read something about them, but had never held one of them in his hands. Incredible but true! Philologically, the word had interested him. *Swaddling clothes* of the early Romans! The *layettes* of an age when Paris was an insignificant island in the Seine! This word rapidly expanded to mean the beginning or place of origin of things and then narrowed according to present usage to its bibliographical significance of books printed in the infancy of the art, mostly between the time of Coster (d. 1439) or Gutenberg (d. 1468) and 1500 or, as some would have it, 1510.

Four and eighty pounds sterling even less ten per cent. seemed to him a great sum for a single volume which no fellow in the College would read and very few would ever consult or even examine,—a great outlay to gratify the mere sense of possession of the elect. But this was the view of the unregenerate. There was the book, dainty and beautiful in itself, in splendid preservation of paper and typo-

graphy and full of most excellent reading according to accounts, which even a first year student may verify by reading "A Translation of 8 Books of Aulus Cornelius Celsus on Medicine by G. F. Collier," published in London in 1831. And having thus come into the Library of the College of Physicians it at once became a factor in the education of at least one of the fellows, who stood in sore need of knowledge in that particular direction.

II. THE AUTHOR.

It is important to identify an historical personage by his name. In this case there are difficulties; but they are more apparent than real. In the *Éditio princeps*, as is set forth in the foregoing slip from the catalogue, the work begins and ends as the book of Cornelius Celsus. In the most magnificently advertised work of reference^a of this or any period, the name "Celsus" occurs as a side heading but once and is that of a second century opponent of Christianity. But in the index to that work are a number of references to the author of the *De medicina*. Sellar^b speaks of the purity of his style, Allbutt^c of his learning and judgment and the purity and classical perfection of his language and Owen^d regards the treatise of Celsus as the best record of the Alexandrian practice and as standing for the Roman practice of the period following. All these references are under the heading "A. Cornelius Celsus," and this is the name on a majority of manuscripts. On the title pages of many of the editions the name stands Aurelius Cornelius Celsus, but Broca^e quotes Leclerc as pointing out that the collocation of two family names as Aurelius and Cornelius in this manner is contrary to the Roman custom and attributes this confusion of names to errors of the copyists. The discovery of a very ancient manuscript in the Vatican inscribed with the forename Aulus has confirmed this opinion and the initial "A." is now generally accepted as standing for the name Aulus, frequent in the family of the Cornelii. The surname Celsus was common in Rome and a number who bore it were distinguished in medicine, philosophy, law and rhetoric. But the association of the initial "A." and the family name "Cornelius" and the fact that our author wrote upon all these subjects serve to establish his identity and to place him with Pliny and Varro among the Roman Encyclopædists. The assumption that the author of the *De medicina* was the Celsus mentioned in two of the

a. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Eleventh Ed.

b. *Ibidem* Art. Latin Literature Vol. XVI.

c. *Ibidem* Art. Medicine Vol. XVIII.

d. *Ibidem* Art. Surgery Vol. XXVI.

e. M. Paul Broca. *Conférences Historiques*. Paris 1865.

Epistles of Horace, and who was the companion and secretary of the young 'Tiberius,'^a has been adjudged by the scholars who have investigated the subject to be without foundation and has been wholly disproved by the fact that Horace has given the two names of this young courtier as Celsus Albinovanus not Cornelius Celsus.^b

It is not known when Celsus was born nor when he died. It is supposed that he lived in Rome but this is not certain. Ivan Bloch^c concludes from an elaborate critical study of the literature of the period that the *Encyclopædia* of Celsus was written between 25 and 35 A. D., during the reign of Tiberius.

This great work was planned upon a broad scale and represented the knowledge of the period. It was entitled "Artes" and comprised six parts,—rhetoric, philosophy, jurisprudence, the military art, agriculture and medicine. Of these all that survives, with the exception of some scanty fragments upon rhetoric, is the *De medicina libri octo*—"a work which takes its place"—to use the words of Neuburger—"with the *Corpus Hippocraticum* and the writings of Galen as one of the chief monuments of ancient medicine."

Celsus was a patrician and highly educated. The clearness, purity and elegance of his style have received universal commendation. That the *De medicina* owes its inspiration to the works of Hippocrates and the Alexandrians and is in great part a translation from the Greek neither detracts from its importance as a compilation of the medical knowledge of the day nor impairs its value as a specimen of classical Roman literature of a very high order. In fact Celsus is often spoken of as the Cicero of medicine.

Celsus appears to have studied medicine, as he studied the other arts of which he wrote, as a branch of general knowledge. Whether he was a practitioner of medicine or of surgery or of both has been a matter of keen controversy. On the one hand it has been contended that the writer of so remarkable a treatise on medicine, in which not only diseases but also surgical conditions and the operations for their relief are described with a degree of accuracy not encountered elsewhere in the writings of antiquity and who arrives at decisive judgments frequently drawn from personal experience, must have been a practitioner. On the other hand there are many weighty reasons for holding that he was not a physician in the ordinary sense.

a. Q. Horatii Flacci *Epistolarum Liber Primus*.
Epistola III. Ad Julium Florum.
Quid Celsus agit mihi?

b. *Epistola VIII. Ad Celsum Albinovanum*.

Musa, rogata, refer Celso Albinovano, comiti scribaeque Neronis, gaudere, et gerere rem bene

c. *Handbuch der Geschichte der Medicin* Neuburger und Pagel. Jena 1902.

First, no writer of antiquity nor of the middle ages has placed him among physicians. Pliny, who knew him well and referred to him frequently in his writings, nowhere speaks of him as *medicus*, as he always does in speaking of a physician, and where a large list of authorities upon medical subjects is divided into two secondary lists, one of authors and one of physicians, Celsus is always placed in the former and never in the latter.^a Again, while many non-medical writers have referred to the *De medicina* and its author, no physician of antiquity, whether writing in Greek or in Latin, has made reference to either the book or the man. This silence would be altogether inexplicable if the book of Celsus had been written by a physician or had been in the hands of physicians. It was in fact an integral part of an encyclopædia designed for the use of men of the world; and Broca reminds us that in all ages physicians have held this sort of production in disdain. It was not in fact until more than fifteen centuries after the epoch in which Celsus lived and wrote that it was generally assumed that he had been a physician. Furthermore, in the work itself there is much intrinsic evidence that Celsus was not a physician. It is impracticable to pass this testimony in review in the present communication, but any one interested should consult Broca's admirable study and compare his quotations with the original text or one of the translations. The evidence fully warrants the conclusion that he practiced upon his friends and dependents as was the custom among the Romans of his class, but that he did not render his services for pecuniary recompense. Finally, he frequently expresses his doubt as to the value of medicines and occasionally extols popular remedies above those of the Greek physicians, who with slaves and freedmen constituted the profession of medicine in Rome at that period.

It is without doubt due to the fact that the *De medicina* was written by an encyclopædist for laymen and not by a physician for members of his own profession that the influence of Celsus first made itself felt in the fifteenth century, when his medical writings were discovered in manuscript and rendered widely accessible by the art of printing. From that period however until the middle of the nineteenth century Celsus was the most popular of the medical classics. In the evolution of modern medicine his writings are no longer widely read. For such reading there is neither time nor opportunity in the teeming life of the modern medical student. Allbutt has well said that they are "valuable rather as a part of the history of medicine

a. Consult Broca. l. c.

than as the subject of that history" and that they "form no link in the general chain of medical tradition."

Of the personality of Celsus nothing beyond the occasional allusions to himself in the *De medicina* and references to his work by contemporaneous writers is known. All attempts to construct a biography have utterly failed. An excellent example of these disappointing efforts may be found in the "Life" written by the celebrated J. Rhodius and prefaced in the original Latin with an English rendering, in Alexander Lee's Translation of the *Libri octo* in 1831 from the Edition of L. Targa. This biographer was the first to undertake a life of Celsus (1639.)

III. THE BOOK.

The copyists appear to have taken liberties with the title of the book as well as with the name of the author. It is found variously as *De medicina*, *De re medica* and *De arte medica*. In the Editio princeps it stands *De medicina*.

It is by common consent regarded as one of the remarkable books of classical antiquity, not only by reason of the purity and correctness of its style and the orderliness and completeness of its arrangement, but also because it preserves in admirable conciseness all that is essential in the knowledge of medicine and surgery in the epoch preceding that of Galen. It was first printed in 1478, five years before the *Ars parva* of Galen and the *Aphorisms* of Hippocrates. So far as was known at the time of Broca, who wrote in 1865, only two medical works were printed at an earlier date, the *Canon* of Avicenna (1476) and a fragment of Albucasis upon the preparation of medicaments (1471.) But the Stockton-Hough catalogue published in 1890 contains the titles of 124 dated and 41 undated medical or partly medical incunabula printed prior to 1478. The Library of the College of Physicians contains 7 dated and 18 undated incunabula issued before 1478.

Broca informs us that no scientific work had passed through so many editions and that Choulant in 1824 had enumerated fifty-five editions in Latin besides fifteen editions of which the authenticity could not be established and a considerable number of translations into various European languages. There have been many commentators. Van der Linden revised the text, comparing manuscripts and editions with infinite patience and corrected more than two thousand errors committed by the copyists. Morgagni devoted many years to the study of Celsus and wrote between 1720 and 1750 eight critical dissertations upon his works. Finally Targa made the study of

manuscripts and editions literally a life-work and corrected a great number of errors which had escaped the observation of his predecessors. This scholar published an edition in 1769 and a later edition in 1806, which is justly regarded as correct so far as errors of copyists are concerned. Besides the Editio princeps there are listed in the Index Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office of the United States Army three Editions printed prior to the year 1500, namely one each in 1481, 1493 and 1497. Stockton-Hough's list shows four others.^a It is thus seen that the *De medicina* had an immediate and wide popularity. The manuscript from which the first Edition was printed is lost. It is supposed to have been first discovered by Pope Nicholas V in the fifteenth century. The remarkable eagerness with which the writings of Celsus were received and read during the Renaissance has been attributed to the fact that they were the first of the great medical classics to appear in print, preceding the Hippocratic and Galenical writings by five years. That period of time is however too short to warrant such a conclusion. The explanation must be sought in qualities essential to the work itself which have been sufficiently indicated in the foregoing remarks.

The subject matter is distributed in eight books as follows:

Book I: A Dietary for the well and the sick.

Book II: General etiology, symptomatology, prognosis and therapeutics.

Book III: General pathology and therapeutics, the different forms of fever, insanity and delirium, dropsy, phthisis, epilepsy, jaundice, elephantiasis, stupor and paralysis.

Book IV: A short review of anatomical relations, special pathology and therapeutics *a capite ad calcem*, remarks upon convalescence.

Book V: Materia medica and pharmacy, symptomatology of wounds and injuries, internal and external ulceration, cutaneous affections.

Book VI: Diseases of the head—eyes, ears, nose, teeth, mouth, affections of the male genitalia, the anus, ulceration of the fingers.

Book VII: Surgery.

Book VIII: Diseases of the bones, fractures and luxations.

It does not fall within the scope of this discourse to pass in review in any way the valuable material contained in these books. Our purpose is with the book not with its contents. Everywhere there is abundant proof of the author's learning and originality. The descriptions are those of a masterhand and many of them are readable

a. Incunabula Medica. Editum sumptibus et cura auctoris, Johannis Stocktoni Hugonensis, Treptouii in Novo-Caesarea, MDCCCXC.

cities. The reply is in that to which you have just listened. They may be educational in a very high sense. There are all kinds of libraries, large and small, general and special, technical, historical, genealogical, musical. Even the tablets of the cuneiform script of the Babylonians and Assyrians may be gathered into special libraries. Let each secure what it may in the way of books that bear upon the general subject to which it is devoted.

“There are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays,
And every single one of them is right !”

This is also true of the making of libraries.